

God is in the Details

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ANGELS, ANARCHISTS & GODS, photographs by Christopher Felver, foreword by Robert Creeley, introduction by Douglas Brinkley, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1996, 208 pages, 202 black and white photographs, \$45.00 cloth.

Chris Felver's gang of weird and endearing hip cats and coots might not be quite the company you'd want to entertain in your living room, but being ushered through Felver's lens into theirs is curiously good fun.

Felver's art has induced from his odd-sorted rogue's gallery of subjects—mostly American artists and 'public' figures of the free-spirit stripe, and mostly of a certain age—rare states of openness and intimacy, casualness, responsiveness, willingness to live up to and act out 'character'.

Iconic glamour has little more than crumbling face value here.

It's a pensive, harrowed Ramblin' Jack Elliott who watches from the shadows as Townes Van Zandt chords a Gibson beneath a late-night hotel-room lamp.

A beaming Ed Sanders welcomes a deer to his ferny Wood backyard, while a tousled Gregory Corso studies Devil Kids comics with his son on city-walkup steps.

Radiant Joanne Kyger offers smiling, openhanded invitation to the scrubby bamboo paradise of her Bolinas garden. Flexing a scrawny bicep, Charles Bukowski reaches into a liquor-store cooler for a six-pack of Heineken.

Larry Rivers and Kenneth Koch, skinny-legged in tennis shorts, stage a mock sword fight with wood slats in front of a heroic Rivers canvas.

Stubby mitts stuffed in tweed pockets, portly, rueful, puckish Norman Mailer seems to know more than you do about and also stands (on guard?) before an impeccably-shelved wall of American History. Across the way Gore Vidal too has a secret, and a head like a bowling ball, grizzled around the chins, silvery-silked on top.

Russell Means is a tribal ceremonial, Richard Tuttle down home in jeans amid the New Mexico sage, Eileen Myles a New York neighborhood tomboy in knee-ripped denim and toothy winning-the-world-over grin as she wrestles a big stick from her dog.

Beneath the Zen Center's floral shade Philip Whalen is a round bald roshi in a sweatshirt, with an Alec Guinness twinkle and a cane. Flip a few pages, and Studs Terkel toasts you with a martini. Flip again, and Ed Keinholtz is pointing a gun at you.

William Everson is a snowy-head mountain man in his printshop, Gary Snyder a stout backwoods proprietor with great walking stick outside his Kitkitdizze woodshed. Lawrence Ferlinghetti strums a sunny guitar outside his rustic Bixby Canyon cabin, John Kenneth and Catherine Atwater Galbraith proffer a friendly front-steps-of-the-mansion photo-op salutation, Jimmy Carter hooks his thumbs in his Dockers for Older Guys, penetrating the moment in his Habitat for Humanity baseball hat and matching monogram polo shirt, while Rosalynn, in jeans and shades, appears to second the motion gamely, looking questioning and cute—but not as cute as Oliver Stone in argyle and leather in his earnest office, giving America one honest forlorn hope.

A privileged peek back of the apparitional curtain of charisma that normally shields the famous or semi-famous person behind the public persona, Felver's glimpse at once naturalizes, humanizes and befriends, turning the legendary and notorious into credible and vulnerable real-life creatures.

Felver's specialty is the 'environmental' everyday-ambiance shot which offers a living-at-home feel that's obviously as carefully constructed as any other interesting art. The work includes the set-up, as anyone who's had the pleasure of 'sitting' for this photographer will tell you. The well-

known Felver congeniality, a sort of amiably projected professional mood-ring elation that spills its encouragement and trust into his subjects, is responsible for the generally benign atmosphere of this book. A relaxed, easy-with-itself attitude is inscribed almost as deeply into these venerable, experience-carved faces as their manifestly evident agelines.

Those agelines are an important clue to the nature of Felver's art, in which time's harsh gravity-engraving is almost cheerfully conceded its physical sign—an eroded immanence that before all else states the common fact that one's lived.

Felver's location-shot mean streets and underworlds are both the killing and the playing fields of the Lord, just as the encanyoning of the flesh of his subjects is the badge of a combat less tragic than seriocomic; endless crazy wars appear to have left so many of these faces—and their ungainly, karma-laden bodies—tilted out of line, skewed into fault-sliding blocks and tectonic layers, or about to collapse of their own weight.

Consider, for example, Felver's photograph of a ballooning, puffy-jowled, denture-challenged yet oddly dignified John Wieners. With such nonchalant voyeurist vision we can't help locating ourselves also because there's no possible exit from this truth.

In Felver's art, the ground reveals the figure it undermines, thus ironically supporting it. Necessary and accepted, if not exactly happy baggage of life, the stuff of the moment is curiously scarlike in its offhand disclosure.

E.g., Jim Carroll in black T-shirt and baseball hat, old beyond his years, sitting on a bed at Browns Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky after a gig, counting cash, \$20 bills in neat stacks laid out carefully on the floral spread alongside ashtray, lighter, smokes and TV remote.

Or Hunter S. Thompson behind the wheel of his Grand Ville, with death's-head pipe and white vinyl upholstery, peering warily across the double-truck spread at Kathy Acker in severe leather, cropped skull, piercing stare and five-times pierced head.

Or Hubert Selby, Jr., a starved spectral stickman-revenant in high-wafer schoolboy trousers on the cracked pavement of Edge City, producing a gaptooth grin that could have been coaxed out of the void by no other observing eye on this planet.

With poets Felver often employs a presentational particularity that calls up the dense furnishing of a realistic novel. When the photographer is at his best, the details are truly the life, and personality becomes curiously circumstantial.

In his finest work Felver seems interested in going behind writerly identity, and its self-presentation in the theatric pose, to explore in longer view poetry's strange at-homeness in a weedy, disorder-rife own-world. In that elusive yet familiar poet's ecology of the surprisingly given and the reverently received—out of which something indeterminate and free threatens at any moment to erupt—the art of this photographer seems to discover its proper locus.

The best instance perhaps is the image of James Schuyler in button-down Brooks oxford cloth shirt, crosslegged, one tennis-stripe-stockinged foot dangling, absorbed in perusal of a looseleaf binder, as he sits in a chair before the oxygen-deprived potted plants and sunlit floorlength window of his Chelsea Hotel room. Surrounded by the proliferating, bewildering, fertile chaos of a working poet's environment—bathrobe sprawled across paper-and-book-littered daybed; further disorderly piles of books and notebooks, precariously stacked LP's, an unpaired sandal, an orphaned deckshoe, more clothes strewn over the floor or flung over chairs; mail, checks, paper sacks, loose trash, a sea of pill bottles, all the unkempt intimate objects of an untamed intimist's existence filling up every free space in a wild cultural drift like the beach-deposit midden left behind by some ancient tribe, a vanished artist's nation—Schuyler seems in this photograph carelessly at the center of a teeming, confused life spun out of its own needs, drives and obsessions, yet at the same time inexplicably detached from them, just as his poetry was.